

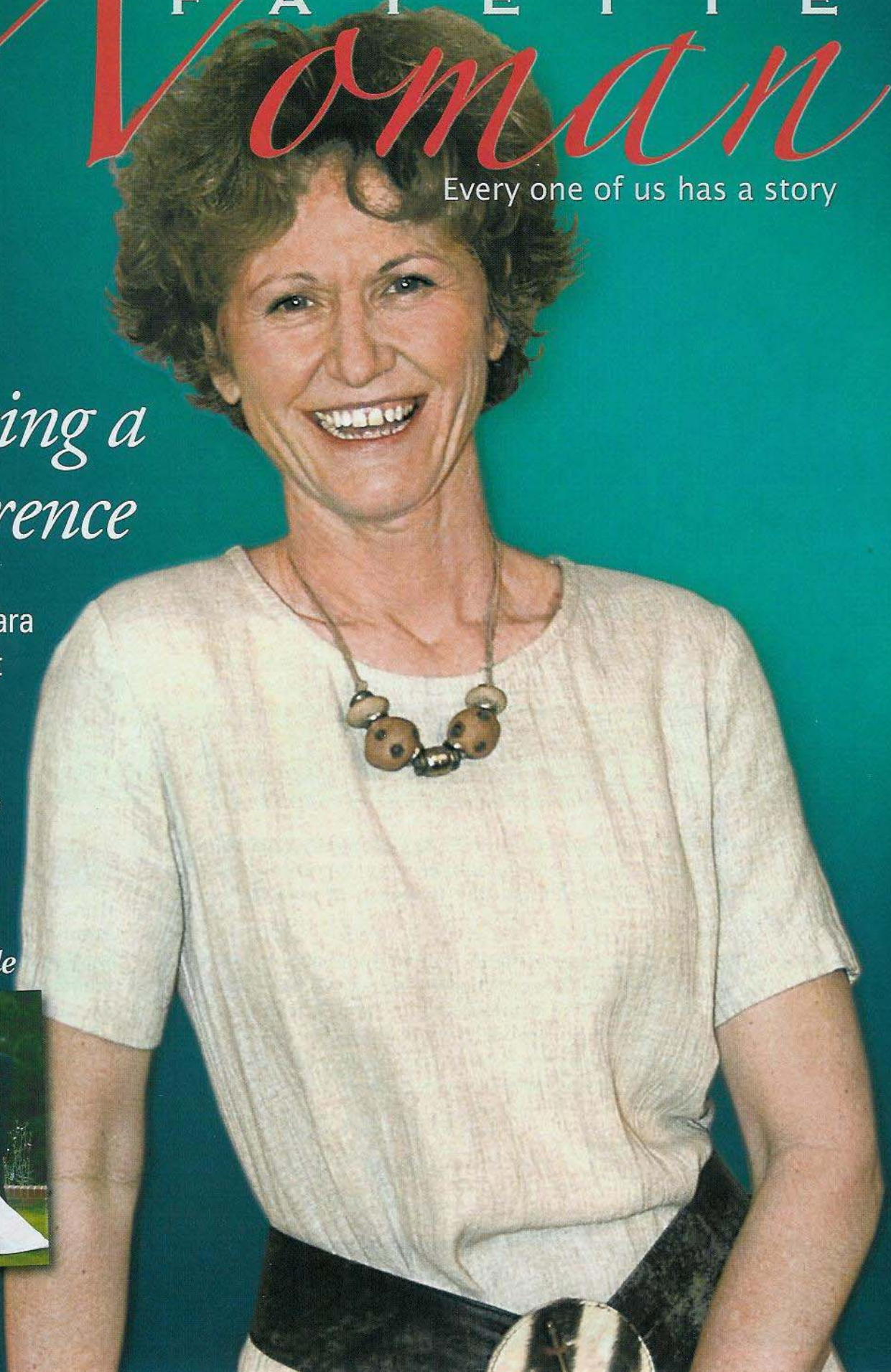
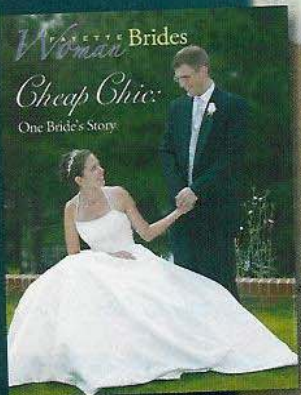
W F A Y E T T E Woman

Every one of us has a story

Making a difference

Elizabeth Bara reaches out to Africa

Look inside for our special edition bride's guide





REACHING OUT TO AFRICA: ASAP

By Sherri Smith Brown

Elizabeth Bara is
an idealist who
knows how to
get things done

It was hot and the African road was bumpy and dusty. It was 1994, and the two idealistic Americans were driving an old pickup truck to Zimbabwe. Elizabeth Bara and Tom Arsenault. She was from Beaverton, Oregon; he was from North Andover, Massachusetts. They were two former Peace Corps volunteers pursuing their dream. They wanted to see if two people with the dream of making a difference could succeed.

Today, nearly 12 years later, Elizabeth Bara, a tall, blond attractive woman with a hearty and infectious laugh, sits in her office in Peachtree City. African masks and photos hang on her walls, and a series of wildlife illustrations drawn by an African friend line the stairway where the delicious smell of roasted coffee wafts up from the office and warehouse below. This is the home of Elizabeth's non-profit organization, ASAP, A Self-help Assistance Program, with the mission of cultivating self-reliance in Southern Africa. ASAP's philosophy is to

focus on the enormous potential of what people can achieve by working together, and its goal is to assist rural African communities in their effort to improve their own lives. On the floor downstairs is her husband Tom's business, the On Safari Trading Company, which imports coffee beans from African farmers, roasts, packages and distributes it.

Elizabeth's decision to help people help themselves began in Beaverton in 1987. Thirty years old with a degree in biology and newly divorced, Elizabeth decided to join the Peace Corps.

"Isn't that what everyone who divorces says they're going to do?" she asks laughingly.

Her Peace Corps adventure took her to Swaziland in Africa where she taught science and math at a rural high school. While there, she met Tom Arsenault, also a Peace Corps volunteer, who was teaching business, technical drawing and woodworking. They fell in love and were wed in Nhlngano, Swaziland, in 1990.

Aside from the fact that she found true love, Elizabeth says that working in the Peace Corps was just like any other job. They worked in a government school that exposed them to African culture, but they both felt like there was more they could do. After returning from the Peace Corps, the couple moved to Sacramento, where Tom had lived previously, and founded ASAP with plans to return to Africa as soon as they acquired funding. Acquiring funding proved difficult, though, since their projects were only theoretical. So in May 1994, the couple decided to "just go for it" and put their theories to the test.

"We didn't have connections. Or money. We were really idealists," laughs Elizabeth. "We just thought we could go out and find some needs and address them." Elizabeth and Tom bought one-way tickets to South Africa, bought a truck and drove up to Zimbabwe.

"We said we'll give it a year and if it doesn't work, we'll leave."

But instead, Elizabeth and Tom stuck to it for eleven years. "It took five years for anyone to notice us," Eliza-



Opposite page: Beautiful handmade baskets Elizabeth brought back from Zimbabwe are displayed on her office walls. Above: Elizabeth and friends helped build new toilets for the community.

beth remembers, shaking her head. "The reception was cold. Tom went to the Rotary and played a lot of golf."

What the couple learned was that to make substantial change, you must create trust. "We could see it would work if you just stuck to it long enough," says Elizabeth. "You have to build a reputation. For instance, if you lived in some small town in the Midwest and some people came in from the outside from out of nowhere, you would think, 'Well, who are these people? Why are they here?' In that sense, Africa's no different from anyplace else. And we didn't realize it. We just thought, we'll get this funding and we'll do this and that. But the fact of the matter is you have to build trust, which takes a long time, especially in a culture like that. You have to build relationships."

Elizabeth Bara believes relationships are what gave her the strength and will to spend 11 years in Africa working from the ground up to build a small organization.

"I've always been good at support. I played volleyball in high school, but I never felt comfortable spiking the ball. I was great at setting up the play so someone else could spike it," she laughs. But she believes that her family and the strong base she has with

them, as well as her love for Tom, have given her an inner strength.

"When you have a foundation where you know people love you, it gives you confidence and drive to do new things. You can operate from a position of strength, and you cannot fail."

"Elizabeth loves a challenge – and achievement," says Tom. "We agreed together that we were going to do this. There was a mutual support between us. There was no way we could leave until everything was okay – our programs were established and a staff trained. You get there, you do it and you make sure it's right. Elizabeth says that if you can't do it right, don't do it at all. That's pretty much her nature."

In Africa, Elizabeth and Tom built programs based on their own experiences. ASAP's first project was the Carpentry Outreach Training. They put Tom's carpentry skills to work for them and began teaching carpentry to locals. The rural schools were in need of furniture and the idea was that the community would become self-sufficient in building furniture for them. During the time this program was in operation, 123 carpenters were trained and furniture for 565 classrooms was built, benefiting thousands of students.

ASAP's Health and Nutrition

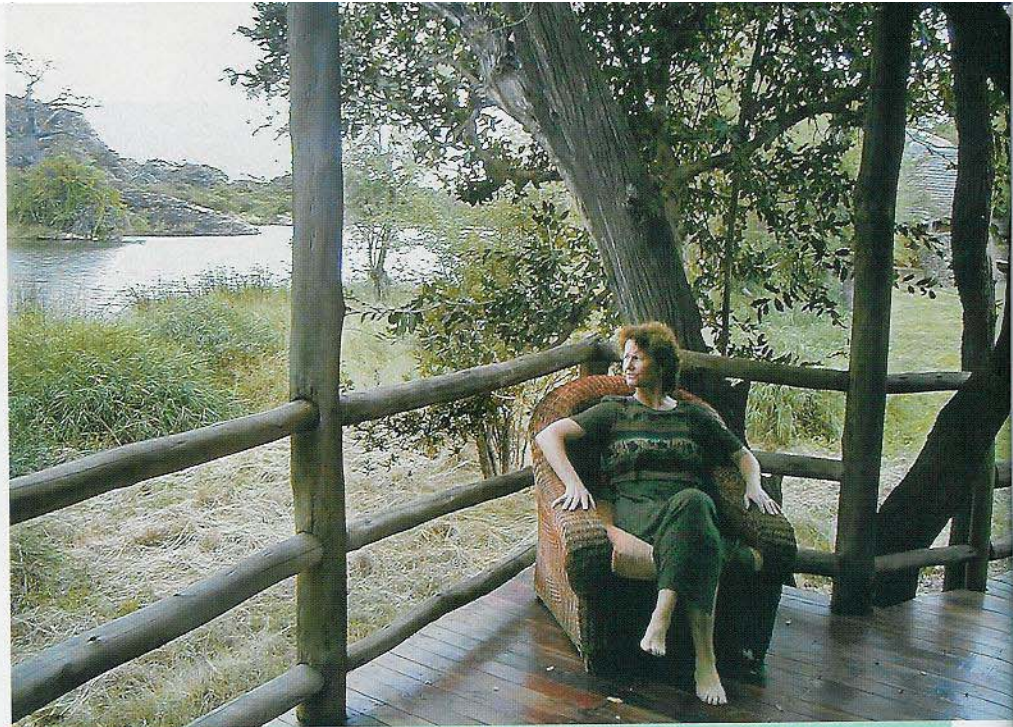
Development Initiative grew out of Elizabeth's experience working in an Oregon HIV lab in the 1980's.

"Poverty in Africa is man-made. It's mainly because of politics," says Elizabeth, "but regardless, the impact of Aids has been devastating."

The project's goal is to strengthen the ability of rural communities to care for the ever-increasing number of orphans, vulnerable children and people suffering from HIV/AIDS. Rural training workshops are held on HIV/AIDS awareness, counseling, psycho-social support, perma-culture techniques, growing and using medicinal herbs, establishing nutritional gardens and vocations skills.

"The idea is to cultivate self-reliance," says Elizabeth. "Development work is different than relief work - only grass roots development projects create sustainable change. Basically, you do it one person at a time. Once you start doing self-help projects and you give people skills that are going to help them survive, there's just so much you can do. You're only limited by your funding and your ideas."

Today, ASAP has a staff of twenty people in Zimbabwe and ongoing projects that focus on improving the lives of rural women and their families and on education, which is extremely im-



Elizabeth relaxes on the porch of a local tourist resort. During the off-season, the resort opens it's doors to locals for a restive weekend.

portant to Zimbabwe parents because it is the key to preventing poverty. One of Elizabeth's favorite programs is the Rural Women's Savings Club Project, which grew out of a CARE International project for saving and internal lending. ASAP replicated it in eastern Zimbabwe.

"Education is a priority there and paying school fees is the most im-

portant thing parents can do," says Elizabeth. ASAP teaches the women how to form a club and save money as a group. They then are able to borrow this money to fund things like school fees, seeds for planting or household items, such as blankets or livestock. The objective is to enable the women to be more self-reliant and improve access to capital for their own income generating projects. ASAP provides no funds, only training in how to form the savings clubs, select members and maintain the books, as well as internal loan procedures. Since the project began in 2002, more than 14,000 women have participated.





Elizabeth is surrounded with photos of her life in Africa.

giving them money, but instead, giving them knowledge. "That's the essence of sustainable development," says Tom. "That is the target for developing agencies. When she said that, we knew we had done our job."

ASAP has initiated numerous other programs that help people in rural areas to improve their lives. The Bridge the Gap Project helps children master math and make a successful transition from primary to secondary school. Since less than half of these children will continue to secondary school in Zimbabwe, the Vocational Skills Support program helps children learn hands-on life skills during primary school.

Today, the Improvement of Rural Education program supports 120 schools with basic teaching supplies – such as notebooks, pen, chalk and

markers – which schools cannot afford. ASAP also has provided twelve state-of-the-art computer labs to rural secondary schools to support relevant technical skills training and is spearheading the Computer Science Syllabus Project to redefine and rewrite the computer Science Syllabus for Zimbabwe Secondary Schools.

Elizabeth says it's sometimes hard to see the big picture when you're doing the on-site management of an organization. "It drives you crazy. If you're too close; you can't get past the day to day." Last year, Elizabeth and Tom decided that they needed a fundraising plan and the best way to establish that plan was to return to the United States. In May 2005, they settled in Peachtree City where they had visited Tom's sister several times. "This is too clean," laughs Elizabeth. "But after

eleven years of dirt roads, I'm ready for too clean."

Leaving a competent staff behind to run the programs, Elizabeth is now working to establish a firm funding base and presence for ASAP here in the United States to support and expand the ongoing work.

"If you live in America, even if you're on welfare, you're wealthy," she says.

Elizabeth thinks that if the people of the United States work toward improving the conditions in poorer countries then those people would not want to immigrate to America. "It is only when people have no hope for a better future that they want to leave their homeland and come to the United States," she says. "The United States should help them so they can have a decent life at home."

Elizabeth believes she has proved many things to herself during her time in Africa. One is that she can develop a project and take it to the final cut. Another is that even an individual can have an impact. "ASAP is small, but small is beautiful," she says. "It's the power of a small organization having a huge impact on a small area."

Elizabeth and Tom will go back to Zimbabwe for a couple of weeks in mid-February and will return at least once a year. When they get back home, Elizabeth will begin looking for volunteers to help build ASAP's US fundraising program.

"I've never not had motivation. It's the power of love. It gives you strength," Elizabeth says with a smile.

Elizabeth Bara has not only set up the volleyball, she has spiked it. Hard and right on target. Most people only say they're going to join the Peace Corps after a divorce, but she did it. Most people would stay in Beaverton, Oregon. But Elizabeth Bara has seen the world and is truly helping to improve it – one person at a time. — *fw*



A SELF-HELP ASSISTANCE PROGRAM